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# *Introducing the Art of*



# NIKOLAI KONDAKOV

**A** subway ride across Moscow on a rainy night in March. A gray, weather-weary apartment house, on a dark street of apartment houses. A temperamental lift that won't be hurried. Down a narrow, dimly-lighted corridor to the flat of Nikolai Kondakov. His wife, a stout, strong-willed woman answers the knock. Layers of cardboard pad the door to keep out the cold.

You are at the home of Russia's foremost naturalist/painter. In his passion and brilliance, he will remind you of Roger Tory Peterson, another great naturalist/painter of the 20th century. Kondakov and Peterson have existed parallel to one another for 84 years, divided by a wall of nationalistic ideology and fear. Both were born in 1908; one in Jamestown, New York, U.S.A.; the other in the town of Ryzan, Czarist Russia. Each, unknown to the other, redefined the relationship

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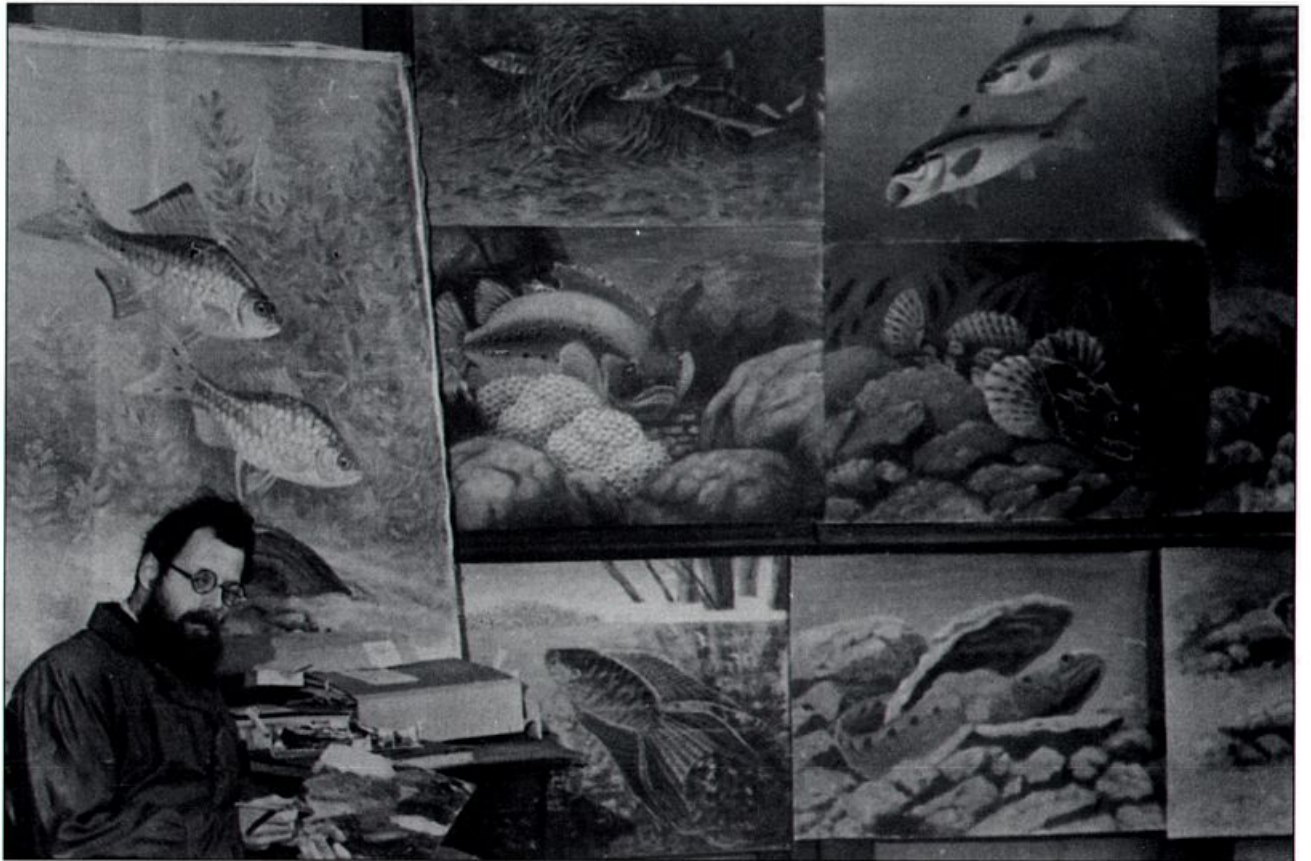
**Tory  
Peterson**

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**By  
Malcolm  
Abrams**



H. 50



Two species of bee-eater, the Blue-cheeked, *Merops superciliosus* (left) and European, *M. apiaster*, are shown in the 1950 illustration on page 39. Konakov at work over a 20-year span doing large natural history illustrations in 1928 (top) and 1948. Note the range of subjects included in his skilled work.



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of science, nature and art.

“You are the first person who has ever recognized my husband for his work,” his wife Tatyana excitedly tells Marshal Case of the National Audubon Society, who has sought out Kondakov at his Moscow apartment. Is this possible?

In America, Peterson is revered and commands handsome fees for his paintings. In Russia, Kondakov is virtually unknown outside of the scientific community.

Case had gone about his educational work in Russia keeping an eye out for outstanding bird painters. Surely in the whole of what was the Soviet Union, there must be one.

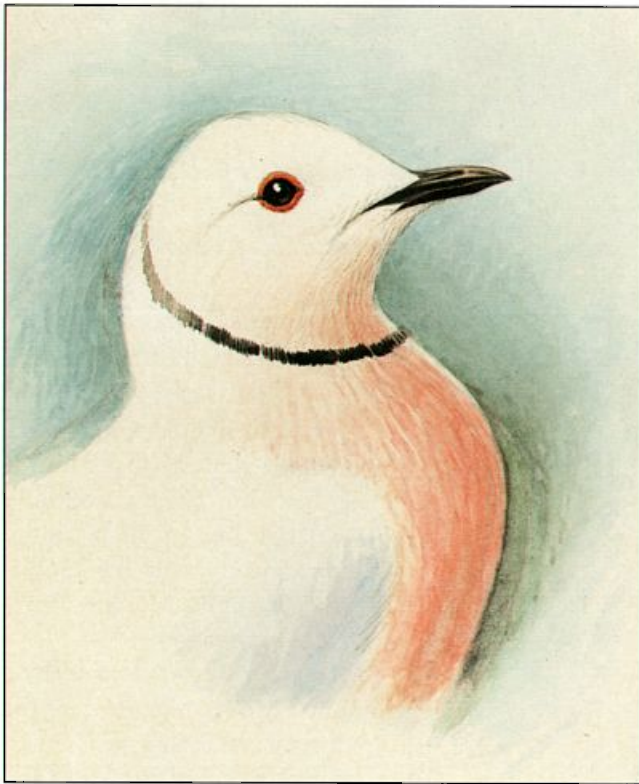
With the help of his friend Nikolai Drozdov, host of the popular Russian television series “In the World of Animals” he has found Kondakov. Drozdov’s mother was a childhood friend of the artist, and Drozdov knows him well.

Valyeri Ilyichev, president of the All-Union Ornithological Society, first mentioned the name Nikolai Kondakov. “We asked Ilyichev if he had any suggestions,” says Case. “He said there were no active, famous painters in the country, but that there was an old man who lived in the Moscow area...”

Weeks later, on the set of “In the World of Animals,” Case asks the same question of the famous television host, and hears the name



**Yellow-throated Bunting, *Emberiza elegans* (top, in 1948), and the Black-faced Bunting, *E. spodocephala* (bottom, in 1975).**



Included in this nice comparison of Ross' Gulls (*Rhodostethia rosea*) are a portrait of an adult from 1932 and a fine study of a fledgling juvenile, painted in the field.

Kondakov for a second time. "He still paints every day," Drozdov says.

In Moscow, they say, if you know the right people, no one is more than two phone calls away.

That same evening they take the subway to the artist's flat.

Inside the apartment, books are everywhere, especially in Kondakov's small work space, where they are stacked ceiling-high. A painting in progress is set aside because of company. It becomes apparent, over tea and chocolates,

that in a communist society, utilitarianism is what matters. A naturalist's painting is valued for exactness only, not for beauty. In 70 years, Kondakov has painted 150,000 pictures for 10,000 books and journals. He has won no medals; he has presented no one-man shows. At best, he has earned a modest living.

A marine biologist by education, Kondakov's exceptional painting skills brought him to the attention of government officials. From his early twenties on, he followed the directives of the Supreme Soviet. Not a bad life, as it turned out, for a man single-minded about nature and art.

"I paint so accurately because I love all creatures," he tells Case. Though frail and bent, a sparse gray beard and heavy glasses seemingly testaments to the trials of his times, the years disappear as he talks excitedly about animals and beauty, journeys and adventures. From the Baltic Sea to the Bering Sea, from

### GUY TUDOR ON KONDAKOV

*When American Birds asked Guy Tudor, one of the western world's finest bird artists and recent recipient of the MacArthur Award, to view and comment on the illustrations of Nikolai Kondakov he said:*

His greatest strength is as a field artist. Those studies done in the field capture an accuracy and sense of life of birds in their natural setting. Kondakov reminds me of some of the best when he has a personal feel for the subject; with it in front of him he is better than most bird artists. His jaeger chick and juvenile gull and crane are most accomplished and show subtle patterns of feather coloration and arrangement. These are not obvious features unless you know the bird in life.

It would seem that Kondakov was probably obligated to crowd bird portraiture into his busy days as a museum man. As such he was undoubtedly responsible for dioramas, temporary and permanent exhibits, educational programs and expedition assignments. His illustrations reveal him as a good all-around naturalist. His juvenile Ross' Gull, for instance, is a really nice life study. You can tell that he was mentally with the bird. Also, his depictions of mushrooms, tree frogs, and butterflies are very impressive.



**Present-day photo of Nikolai Kondakov (center) and his wife Tatyana, with Nikolai Drozdov (left) and Marshal Case (standing).**

Kondakov's favorite subjects, but like every outdoorsman, he has a "fish story." In 1949, during the repressive Stalin years, he was ordered by Mikoyan, minister of trade and commerce, to paint "all the useful fishes for catching in the Soviet Union."

That assignment nearly landed Kondakov in the Siberian gulag. "They would not believe that one fish I had painted called zelenushka — that means 'green fish' — even existed," he explains. "'This fish, it can't be like this, it can't be like this,' they said."

A *wrongly*-painted fish could cost you your freedom in Stalin's time. Kondakov was accused of mislead-

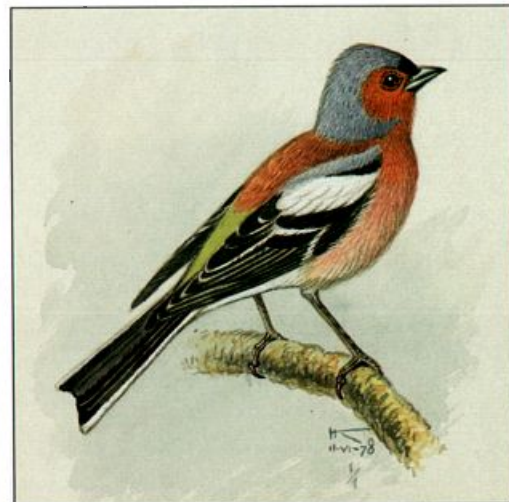
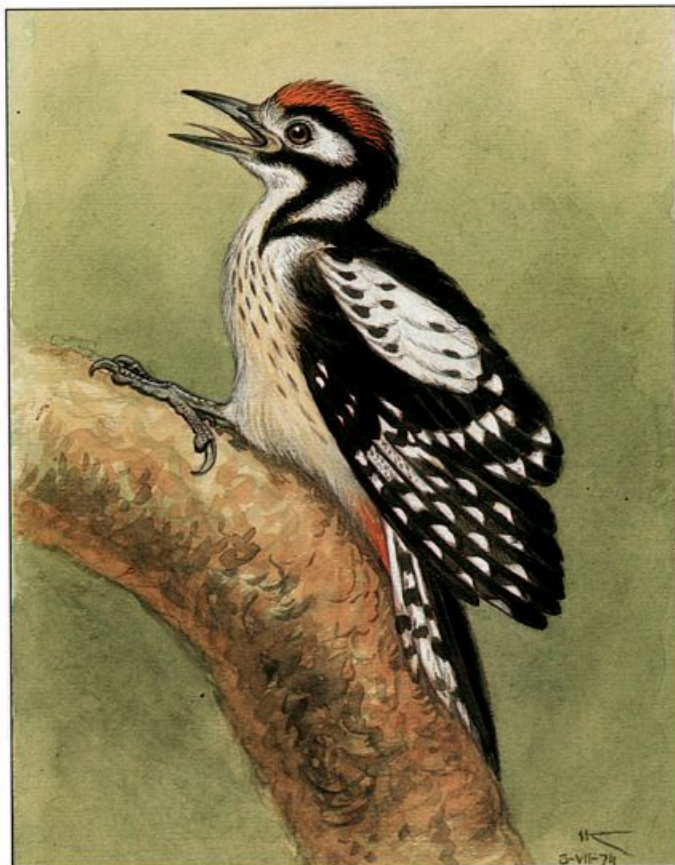
Tashkent to Siberia, he has travelled by car, train, boat, plane, horseback, camel and reindeer sleigh — always on assignment to paint nature.

Even underwater. "Oil is very

tough and it doesn't dissolve in water," he explains, "although fish would come along and nibble at some of the paint."

Birds and sea mammals are

**Spanning 40 years of Kondakov's career are a juvenile Middle-spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos medius*) in 1974, an adult male Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*), in 1978, and a nestling Parasitic Jaeger (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) painted in the field in 1934.**





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ing the motherland and embarrassing the Supreme Soviet Committee. Only when an actual zelenushka fish in a bottle was presented by the Academy of Sciences was Kondakov declared off the hook.

Through purges and putsches, revolutions and coups, from Nicholas II to Yeltsin — from a small boy to an old man — Kondakov has worked at his art. During the Second World War, he was trapped in the 900-day siege of Leningrad by the Nazis. Almost dead from starvation, friends saved his life by carrying him out across a frozen lake.

Stories are told into the night to this curious American from the National Audubon Society, translated from Russian to English by the famous host of a television show. Nothing is surprising when you have lived 84 years in Russia.

Case mentions the name of Roger Tory Peterson. "I just talked to him last week. He is going to be very interested to hear about you as a person," he says. Kondakov's eyes light up and he reaches for a book high on a shelf. It is *The World of Birds* by Roger Tory Peterson and James Fisher.

"You know," Case says of his friend thousands of miles away, "Roger still paints every day, just like you." ■

**White-winged Crossbills (*Loxia leucoptera*) with a snow-capped nest. Juvenile Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis*). Kondakov on expedition in 1950.**

